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XV

THE SPIRITUAL SUBSTITUTE

THE two following chapters, more than any others, show what difficulties may attend even a work of mere ethnography. When the observer is confronted by a mass of vague and very tangled beliefs, it becomes a rather delicate task to set them down in a manner that will be intelligible to the reader and yet have an honest regard to their limitations. The first difficulty arises in the fact that a native's beliefs are largely inexplicit; he has never tried to frame them in words, and thus one is sometimes compelled to fall back on inference. The next difficulty arises in the fact that of even the more explicit beliefs many turn out to be mutually irreconcilable. Whereas a modern educated mind must be continually raking over its beliefs and conscientiously casting out any inconsistencies, the mind of the native (like the mind of an uneducated modern—only more so) remains blissfully unaware of these inconsistencies. Thirdly, the native's beliefs are not always firmly held. There is no such thing as strict orthodoxy, and, indeed, it may be claimed that abstract belief, compared with practice and ritual, is to him of small account. Where we find uniformity of practice we may also find a variety of theoretical explanations, and the same informant may cheerfully switch from one explanation to another, or simply declare that 'he doesn't know'. In fine, natives are unable or reluctant to formulate their beliefs; the beliefs when formulated are often inconsistent with one another: and not less often they are light, inexact, variable things, qualified with a non-committal 'perhaps' or 'who knows?'

Those beliefs which relate to the spiritual and the supernatural are probably hazier and more confused than any other. It is the business of these chapters to set them down as far as possible systematically, yet resisting the temptation to manipulate or trim them, or to force them into a system that may be intelligible to the reader but does not neces-

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sarily exist in the mind of the native. More specifically our subjects are the beliefs concerning what may loosely be called the spirits of the living and the spirits of the dead. Out of the confused mass of evidence we may extricate two propositions, and set them down definitely as a groundwork. (1) Of every creature and thing there is a 'spirit' or immaterial counterpart called *asisi*. (2) Every human being survives death, and the entity which thus survives, whatever its form, is called a *sovai*.[1] These two propositions are matters respectively of native philosophy and religion. We shall continue here to discuss the first, and shall reserve the second until the next chapter.

The Meanings of Asisi

The word *asisi*[2] is, I believe, in general use. One hesitates to lay down its literal meaning, but it is used for 'shadow', and for 'reflection', and these are the simplest of its meanings and probably fundamental. There is thus far no psychic implication in the word. Shadows and reflections are ordinary phenomena to the Orokaiva, which he observes and accepts without beating his brains for an explanation. But there are other manifestations which take a rather more psychic turn. Such are the appearance of human and other beings in dreams and visions, and to these the name *asisi* is extended without, of course, implying that they are identical with shadow or reflection. In this connexion *asisi* stands for the immaterial counterpart which is visible. In so far as the native bothers to form a theory of dreams (*eture*), he says that in his sleep he may be visited by *asisi*, or, on the other hand, that his own *asisi* may travel.[3] It is not necessary to give examples of dreams, but merely to repeat that in them the *asisi* is regarded as the immaterial but visible counterpart of the person or thing dreamt of.

But when, in the native's dream theory, the *asisi* of the

[1] For other dialectal forms see p. 267.

[2] In the 'Taro Cult' (Report No. 6 in *Orokaiva Magic*), which dealt with a movement originating among the Binandele, the Binandele form *atisi* was used throughout. *Asisi*, in accordance with the rule adopted in this book, is the Aiga form.

[3] It is also said that a man's *eye* travels as he dreams, though there is, of course, no notion of a material eye-ball passing through the air.